

Victim Services Within Law Enforcement

“In a free society, we are absolutely dependent upon the aid of these victims to hold the criminal accountable. In return the victim deserves support and fair treatment.”
(C.A.L.E.A. Standard 55 Victim/Witness Assistance)

Created in 1981, the long held mission of the Victim Services Division of the Austin Police Department is to respond to crime victims’ psychological and emotional needs. This is achieved through crisis intervention, counseling, advocacy, education, information and referrals for victims of crime and trauma, individuals with mental illness, witnesses and communities. In addition to these primary responsibilities, the Division provides assistance to criminal justice personnel and the community. The overall mission is to positively impact the quality of life for the citizens of Austin. Austin has grown immensely since 1981. Still, Victim Services remains the doorway through which many victims, survivors, families and neighborhoods experiencing crime and trauma first receive any social services. In 2010, Victim Services had over 19,000 contacts with victims, witnesses and survivors.

Victim Services is Structured to Meet the Needs of the Austin Police Department

There are two major components to the service offered by the division, crisis (on-scene) response and investigative support and follow up. This is accomplished through the work of three functional units, Crisis Response Team, Domestic Violence Unit and Violent Crimes Against Persons Unit.

On-Scene Crisis Response Team (Crisis Team)

The Crisis Response Team provides mental health and practical intervention as close to the time of the event as possible. This intervention may include crisis counseling and stabilization, justice support, personal advocacy, emergency placement in shelter or protective services, and information and referrals to other helpful service providers. Crisis Team services are provided all day, every day and require the combined efforts of full time staff and volunteers. To accomplish this round the clock service, Crisis Team employs ten full time counselors.

Most frequently, Crisis Team is requested to respond to victims of domestic violence. After a briefing from the officer on scene, the counselors speak with the victim to obtain an understanding of their needs. At this point, their mental health experience and training really becomes crucial. Many of these victims have lost sight of any options other than to stay in the abusive relationship and hope it changes for the better. Counselors help the victim explore alternatives, giving priority to their personal safety and the safety and welfare of their children, if any. Crisis Team responds to victims of numerous other crime types including child and elder abuse and neglect, sexual assault, robbery, kidnapping, homicide, and assault. Crisis Team counselors depend on their well-honed assessment skills to provide the best possible services.

Though Crisis Team is devoted to working with victims and witnesses of crime, they are also available to respond to requests from any emergency service of the city. When Austin Fire Department or Emergency Medical Services encounter individuals needing mental health support or advocacy services, they are free to contact Crisis Team for immediate response.

Investigative Support and Follow-up

Working in conjunction with unit detectives, counselors provide investigative support and follow up to victims and witnesses of domestic violence, homicide, robbery, child abuse, sex crimes, traffic fatalities, missing persons, human trafficking and aggravated assaults. Utilizing a variety of skills, these counselors are instrumental in supporting victims and witnesses throughout the investigative process, leading towards successful prosecution and conviction of offenders. These skills are also used to assist victims put their victimization in a pro-healing context. For instance, it is important to assist a child victim of sexual abuse to realize that the crime was not their fault. The counselors' activities include crisis counseling, information and referral (in person and by telephone), justice support and advocacy, personal advocacy, home hospital and school visits, assistance with Crime Victims' Compensation and Protective Order application, court accompaniment and community debriefings. The two investigative support units are the Domestic Violence Unit and Violent Crimes Against Persons Unit.

Domestic Violence Unit

Currently there are eight counselors and one supervisor assigned to the Domestic Violence Unit. They are the mental health component of a larger collaborative effort, the Family Violence Protection Team. This team brings together law enforcement investigators, counselors, Offices of the County and District Attorney, SafePlace, and legal services. Several of these functions are co-located. This arrangement employs the one-stop shopping concept that seeks to provide as many services needed by domestic violence and stalking victims as possible. These services include the giving of statements to law enforcement, crisis counseling, applications for orders of protection, emergency shelter, transitional housing, and longer- term counseling. Some of these counselors are housed in the larger police substations throughout the city. This allows them to also assist people in crisis that call or walk into the substations. They also provide victim services assistance to decentralized investigators.

Violent Crimes Against Persons Unit (VCAP)

The Violent Crimes Against Persons Unit supports victims throughout the criminal investigation process. In addition to keeping victims informed of the status of their cases they provide crisis stabilization, personal advocacy and assist in the application process for Crime Victims' Compensation. They also assist victims and witnesses in preparing for composite drawings of suspects and pre-text phone calls. In addition, the counselors help coordinate funeral services and transportation of deceased back to countries of origin. These counselors are often housed with the investigative units they support. They work closely with the Vehicular Homicide, Child Abuse, Robbery, Sex Crimes, and Homicide units. Additionally, they are responsible for receiving those who call in or walk

into Police Headquarters. This unit is currently staffed with six counselors and one supervisor.

Both crisis response and investigative support and follow-up are often the first point of entry for people into the criminal justice, legal and social service systems. Strong collaborative relationships with other government and nonprofit organizations are essential to providing the necessary continuum of care that victims of crime deserve.

Interagency Collaborations are Essential

Over the years, we have come to appreciate the interdependency of local service providers towards meeting the needs of victims of crime. Ideally victims could be supported by a single entity throughout their experience in the criminal justice system. This is just not possible, however. Victim Services within law enforcement is forced to depend on strong referrals to other agencies for continuum of care. This amounts to a series of agency hand-offs. The possibility of a disjointed response to victim's needs weakens our ability to be truly attentive to our community. Redundancies in services threaten the effective use of sparse funds needed to keep all of the programs viable. To combat this, local agencies in Austin and Travis County have formed collaborations in which concerned stakeholders form teams to regularly meet and determine the best practices for service provision. Some of these collaborations in which APD Victim Services participates include the Austin Travis County Family Violence Task Force (from which the Family Violence Protection Team was developed), Child Protection Team, Child Fatality Review Team, Austin Travis County Domestic Violence Fatality Review Team, Coalition Against Human Trafficking, Hate Crimes Task Force, Immigrant Services Network of Austin and the Sexual Assault Response and Resources Team.

Reliance on Volunteerism

Like many service-oriented agencies, APD Victim Services uses the talent and generosity of a volunteer staff to leverage our ability to provide service. The volunteer pool utilizes local professionals who, by virtue of their education, training and experience, are equipped to function in the intense environment associated with crime scenes and distraught victims. Volunteers are provided extensive training and primarily serve as assistants to Crisis Team counselors. All are subjected to criminal background checks. With additional training, a select few advance to Volunteer Team Leader status. These team leaders function as Crisis Team counselors in which they respond to requests for assistance by patrol officers, use police radios, on-board computers and drive unmarked police vehicles. Victim Services volunteers are a group of highly motivated and dedicated individuals. They are required to ride out at least once a month to remain on active status.

Beyond Austin

Victim Services' resources are dedicated to meet the needs of the City of Austin. However, APD Victim Services' personnel have been deployed to other parts of the country when there have been incidents of great magnitude. Events such as the tornado in Jarrell, Texas and the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City quickly overburden the resources of local service providers. At these times, outside victim

services providers are requested to provide relief to local agencies and continue the provision of on-scene crisis responders. In addition to the examples above, APD Victim Services has responded to such tragic events as the fall of the Texas A&M bonfire, the Luby's Massacre in Killeen, the Branch Davidian siege in Waco and the Echelon incident in Austin.